

A foxy kinda love



Girish Arjun Punjabi, a wildlife biologist and researcher

Girish Arjun Punjabi is an alumnus of the Post graduate program in Wildlife biology & Conservation run by the Wildlife Conservation Society-India and National Centre for Biological Sciences. He has recently been awarded Carl Zeiss award for wildlife conservation for his efforts to conserve wildlife in the northern Sahyadris, through on-ground research and outreach. His interests include carnivore ecology, monitoring wildlife, and science based conservation advocacy. He is currently based in his hometown, Pune.



Girish speaking at the Zeiss award ceremony

How did you feel when you first heard that you have won Carl Zeiss award for wildlife conservation?

I felt glad, and then it filled me with humility. I think this award will help me focus on conservation of the wildlife in the northern Sahyadris. This is a great honour and I'm thankful to Valmikji, other members of the selection committee, and ZEISS for this award.

When you truly felt that this is your field of work? How did you turn to wildlife studies?

I think it happened when I was in a place called Balas in Sawai Mansingh wildlife sanctuary in Rajasthan, which is part of the Ranthambore Tiger reserve now. I was a novice then, but living ten-days in a forest guard's shoes taught me something that I was yearning to learn. I was sitting on a cliff-face with a few others and seeing the sun go down after a heavy downpour, I think I decided to take the plunge then. I took up wildlife studies for my Masters at NCBS and WCS-India in 2008. That course, no doubt, was a turning point in my life.

You studied Indian foxes for your masters' dissertation, why did you choose foxes (we rarely hear anybody talking about foxes!)? What were your findings?

I've always loved foxes! They're the smallest wild canids around, so I was always keen to learn more about them. I remember doing a mad bike-trip with a colleague in the heat of May across Rajasthan looking for them. We traversed 1200 km of the state trying to locate the desert fox, a species found in north-west India. When the time came for my dissertation, it wasn't very hard to choose what I wanted to study. I studied den-site selection of Indian foxes in a human-dominated landscape near the GIB sanctuary in Solapur. We found that at the large scale foxes primarily chose grasslands when denning in the agricultural matrix. At the small scale, visibility of the surroundings, presence of rodents, and human-made structures, such as bunds, well-tailings came out to be important. Grasslands are highly threatened habitats in India today, and we found that grasslands were indeed important habitats for this species, but at the same time they appear to have opportunistically used human-made structures.

Your projects and interests have taken you to wildlife areas all over the country, what were your observations, how did you feel?

The diversity of wildlife and habitats is immense and spectacular, and as a country we've done a great job in conserving this diversity up till now. But suddenly I feel things have started turning turtle, and we seem to be losing this regard for our wild heritage. Most places I go now, there's this talk of 'development', habitats are being fragmented, biodiversity being lost, and yet little do we know how this loss in biodiversity will affect us in the future.



Setting camera trap, photo courtesy : Girish Punjabi

Then you worked on a project which examined large carnivore occupancy in the northern Western Ghats. Please tell us about it.

Yes, I was on this project under Dr. Advait Edgaonkar to understand what proportion of area (a.k.a occupancy) tigers, leopards, dholes, and sloth bears occupy in the north Western Ghats, a region still lesser studied for mammals I'd say. We also tried to understand how forest area, large prey availability, and human presence affected large carnivore distribution at a landscape scale. This was funded by Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment and supported by Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bangalore.

Presently also you are working on a project – Sahyadri Corridor. What is this project about?

This project's my brainchild, but I'm thankful a lot of organizations and people have supported my endeavour. The project basically focuses on retaining and improving connectivity for large carnivores in the north Western Ghats. This, of course, is not possible without stakeholder involvement, so we've also focused on creating partnerships with people working in different parts of the region. Most importantly the project works closely with the Maharashtra forest department and we're collecting some incredible information through camera-traps placed outside of PAs in the corridor region.

You have also done important work in Tillari region of Maharashtra, please tell us about it.

Tillari is an amazing region at the tri-junction of Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka. I saw the area for the first time during the large carnivore occupancy survey in 2010, ever since I've been captivated by Tillari. Now, we're meticulously documenting what wildlife exists in the region through camera-traps. We've found evidence of tigers, elephants, and there seems a reasonably high density of sambar and gaur in the area. This area has great potential for wildlife conservation, if only we can prevent it from falling prey to silly development ideas.

You also did a rapid survey of biodiversity in 25 villages in Sawantwadi-Dodamarg region. What were your impressions?

This area holds a lot of biodiversity and this is evidenced by the fact that we found so much in just a short one-week survey. The people there understand this and how biodiversity is important for their own livelihoods, but are being deceived to oppose the ecologically sensitive area declaration. There is immense threat to this region by proposed mining activities, and rubber plantations that are clearing hundreds of acres of forest. Hopefully, better sense will prevail.

You support science based conservation, how do you think recent technological developments can help conservation?

Technology can help conservation in many ways, especially by helping managers and researchers monitor areas. Take the case of camera-traps as an example- I've been using them to document wildlife that was until now never or rarely reported from these parts. Especially in human-dominated landscapes, where wildlife is usually very shy. In one case, we also managed to catch poachers who had killed a sambar deer, as we got clear shots of their faces. Nowadays, camera-traps even come with email/MMS facilities so monitoring can become real-time, helping us act in time.

You study carnivore ecology, human-carnivore interactions is an important aspect of this. How do you look at it?

Yes, these interactions are an important aspect in carnivore conservation. Whether attitudes are positive or negative towards species does determine if they would occur in human-dominated areas or not. It's amazing to see in some areas where I work, that tigers and leopards are treated as gods and people want to have them around their village. But how these dynamics change in a market-driven world is something we should keep an eye for.



With forest department officials

What are your other interests apart from wildlife and environment?

I rarely gave that a thought, but now that you ask me I enjoy hiking a lot. I like reading travelogues, and Indian writing. I love football, but I rarely get to play a game nowadays. I used to like cycling till I had a terrible accident after which I left.

What message that is close to your heart, would you like to pass on to our readers?

Everyone can do their bit for the environment around them. One only needs to try, because even the act of trying will make one feeling satisfied and full of empathy.

Thank you. It was really nice talking to you. Our heartiest wishes will always be with you for the great work you have been doing.

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